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Pre-marital sex among secondary school students: Do mass media and peer group matter?

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Abstract

The study investigated the influence of some perceived factors (Mass Media and peer influence) on pre-marital sex among 500 randomly selected secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos state, southwest Nigeria. The instrument used to collect data was a modified 4- point Likert scale questionnaire designed by the researchers and validated by experts in test and measurement in Lagos State University, Lagos State, Nigeria. A test-retest method with a correlation co-efficient of 0.76 was used to determine the reliability of the instrument when it was subjected to Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient, an indication of the reliability and suitability of the instrument for the study. Data collected were analyzed with frequency count and simple percentage while chi-square (X^2) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The results showed that mass media and peer group were perceived factors influencing pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State. It was recommended that parents should advise their children to show more interest in media that promote decent sexual behaviour. The media should desist from promoting unhealthy sexual behaviour among adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescent; mass media; peer group; pre-marital sex; sexual behaviour

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1. Introduction

The period of adolescence can be demanding and challenging for young adults. Physical changes to their bodies, their mental and psychological attitudes as well as their relationship in the society have made them to raise issues about their personality and how they fit into the ever changing world around them. Issues such as how they fit into their family, their relationship with friends or peers, with their teachers and other people around them tend to occupy their mind. As adolescents, they are more pre-occupied with self- identity, self-image and acceptability in the society and self- awareness. They therefore try to discover and solidify their sense of belonging and their social image in any society they find themselves (Moffit, 1993).

Many factors influence the decision by adolescents on when, whether and how to engage in sexual relationship or activity. Some of these factors include self-image, religious inclinations, socio-economic background, media, family values, peer influence, cultural background among others (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2010). However when adolescents tend to abstain from or postpone sexual activity, the support from individuals, adult members of the family and teachers may be necessary to ward off peer, media and other societal pressures as adolescents who receive such support take decisions that are less-risky or risk-free (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2010).

The use of contraceptives or decision to abstain from sexual activity is influenced more by a number of factors such as the level of cognitive development, socio – cultural background, peer influence, individual beliefs, value system and orientation. These factors, according to Massachusetts Department of Education, (2010)may positively influence decisions on the use of contraceptives or abstinence from sexual activity which in turn may lead to a reduction in or prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

The role of peers and other social actors in neighborhood settings is central to the idea of 'pro-early child bearing' communities as young people – particularly in deprived areas where opportunities for social mobility are restricted-may be vulnerable to the influence of peers and others in their communities (Anderson,1991). This type of influence has been described elsewhere in relation to adolescent sexual activity and the risk of pregnancy (Brewster, 1994). Individuals can be influenced by their families, peers, neighbours and others in the community. Adolescents who perceive their friends or peers to be sexually active are likely to engage in sexual activity themselves as well as have multiple sex partners (Moore and Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Evans et al., 1992).

Peer pressure is often used to describe the pressure exerted by a peer group on a person in encouraging him or her to change his or her attitude, behaviour, morals and or values to conform to the group's actions, taste, fashion sense or general outlook on life. A person affected by peer pressure may or may not want to belong to the group. Adolescents may also recognize, dissociate, and thus behave adversely to that group's behaviours. There are two types of peer pressure: positive and negative. Positive peer pressure is when someone tries to help an individual change an attitude for the better while negative peer pressure is the opposite such as pressure on someone to have sex without using a condom, for drugs, popularity, money etc. (Adegoke and Ayoade, 2007).

One of the primary motivations for adolescents is their desire to fit in with their peers. As such, older adolescents tend to experience tremendous peer pressure. In addition to greater peer pressure, teens experience other new pressures as part of their transition to adolescence. There is the likelihood for teenagers to be more influenced by friends in their local environment than close friends at school (DeCew, 1996).

Gender is an important factor that has been used to explain adolescent behaviour. Studies have shown that gender differences may influence adolescent sexual activity. Emler et al. (1987) suggests that girls may be more susceptible to deviant peer influences than boys. However, other studies indicate that boys are more influenced by same-sex peers, whereas girls are more likely to be influenced by their male friends (Warr, 1996; Simons et al., 1994).

Mass media are tools for the transfer of information, concepts and ideas to both general and specific audience. Television is a powerful medium which appeals to large audiences; it reaches people regardless of age, sex, socio-economic background or level of education. In addition, television offers both visual and audio, and it makes dramatic and life-like representations of people and products. Television coverage of public health tends to focus more on issues relating to food items, soaps, oral hygiene, curative medicine and other items. Public health authorities have expressed concern about the influence of the media in promoting false norms about acts of violence, drinking, smoking and sexual behaviour. Rarely is safe sex practice portrayed in the media (Bennet, 2000).

Media are a pervasive and ever present entity in the lives of many individuals. It is a strong influence for constructing meaning in our everyday lives. According to the Social Comparison Theory, "people will (at some point in their lives) compare themselves and significant others to people and image whom they perceive to represent realistic goals to attain" (Botta, 1999). The media is used to define, explain and shape the world around us thereby making automatic comparisons between ourselves, those close to us and situations in our lives after watching the media. Consequent upon these comparisons, there is the motivation to strive for and achieve new found goals and expectations. However, because adolescents have not reached the cognitive level to critically analyze and determine reasonable levels of realistic goals, they tend to take at face value every image and scenario portrayed in the media (Hargreaves and Tiggermann, 2003).

The study of Granello (1997) has shown that the influence of the mass media on the adolescent is more than that of the peer group and the school. Because they tend to see most of the things they view as realistic and attainable, adolescent girls are more likely to imitate or emulate the images portrayed in the media. They will attempt to model themselves, both physically and their actions, after the images they have viewed. Hence they look to the media to define how they should look, act and feel.

Similarly, Murnen and Smolak (2000) have found that television, more than any other form of media, influences adolescent females' attitudes and views about society and social interactions. It is through television that adolescent girls are connected to the expansive social world. Girls watch television to define normal and appropriate roles and behaviour for men and women. This explains why adolescent females look to the media to define their place in the society and help them develop interpersonal skills. In addition to increased violent content in the electronic media, children are today exposed to more adult behaviours like

having sex. Much of what teenagers watch on television and see in other media as exciting, normal and fun usually do not contain discussion on the risks of early sexual activity and/or other sexual related issues or challenges. Children often copy these behaviours in order to make themselves feel like adults (Gentile et al., 2004).

Watching television, going to the cinema or picking up a magazine to read will show the prominence of sexual issue across the media. Although some media incorporate pro-social messages about sex and sexual issues, such as the risks and consequences of unprotected sex, most of the media do not. Whether these messages incorporate positive or negative themes, they are seen by many people today as raising legitimate questions, about the influence they have on the behaviours and attitudes of adolescent viewers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). In recent time, programmes with sexual content on television and in the movies have become more pervasive and explicit as being sexy and engaging in sexual intercourse is depicted as a normal part of a popular, exciting and glamorous adolescent life with little or no consequences of sexual engagement addressed (kunkel et al., 1999).

Borzekowski et al. (2000) found a positive relationship between much video viewing and the onset of alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking and sexual promiscuity in female adolescents. In a study of 56 episodes from five (5) prime – time situational television programmes, Montemurro (2003) found that there were some forms of gender or sexual harassment in some of the television episodes. According to Elliot and Menard (1996) exposure to deviant peers has been linked to increase in a wide range of delinquent behaviours such as drug abuse, covert antisocial behaviour, and violent crimes as well as early and high risk sexual behaviour.

Globally, adolescents are becoming more socially and sexually sensitive, mature and active much earlier than parents and other adults around them would have imagined without having requisite psycho-social knowledge that will make them live healthily in the society thereby falling victim of pre-marital sex. This study therefore focuses on whether peer group and media influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students (adolescents) in Ojo Local Government area of Lagos State, south west Nigeria with a view to equipping them with adequate knowledge that will make them avoid problems of pre-marital sex. The study will afford young people adequate empirical information that will assist them in their dealing with peers in the society. It will also afford adolescents in secondary school with appropriate choice of material and content in the area of mass media.

2. Research questions

The following questions were stated in the study:

- Will mass media influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria?
- Will peer group be perceived as an influence on pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria?

2.1. Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

- Mass media will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students.
- Peer group will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study adopted the descriptive research design. This design was used because it is best suited for data collection, organization, presentation and analysis for the purpose of describing the occurrence of an event or phenomenon within a specified group.

3.1.1. Population and sample

All secondary school students and teachers in Ojo Local Government Area (one of the most densely populated areas in Lagos State) constituted the population of the study. The sample comprised five hundred (500) respondents selected from the population through simple random sampling technique.

3.1.2. Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was a two-part self-designed questionnaire designed and validated by the researchers. It has been used in a previous study (Oladipupo–OkorieandViatonu, 2014). Section A of the questionnaire consisted of items requesting personal information from the respondents such as sex, name of school and age. Section B consisted of items covering the variables for the study. The items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD) and Disagree (D). A test-retest method was used with Pearson's Product Moment Correlation coefficient which produced 0.76. This showed that the instrument was reliable and suitable for the study.

Five hundred (500) questionnaires were distributed by the researchers to the respondents with the help of two research assistants. All the administered questionnaires were retrieved the same day thus ensuring 100% rate of return.

3.2. Data analysis

Frequency counts and simple percentage were used to analyze the personal information of respondents collected while chi-square(X^2) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

4. Testing of hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Mass media will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students.

Table 1. Result of Chi-square (X^2) analysis on mass media and pre- marital sex

	No of Responses	Percentage	X^2cal	X^2 table value	DF	P	Remark
SA	209	41.8	181.55	7.82	3	0.05	Sig
A	186	37.2					
SA	79	15.8					
D	26	5.2					
TOTAL	500	100.0					

X^2 cal = 181.55, X^2table = 7.82, DF= 3 at 0.05

Table 1 shows that the calculated chi- square (X^2) of 181.55 is greater than the chi-square (X^2) table value of 7.82 with df=3 at 0.05 level of significance. With this result, the hypothesis which states that mass media will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students is hereby rejected. This is an indication that mass media was perceived as influencing pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area.

- Hypothesis 2: Peer group will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students.

Table 2. Result of chi-square analysis on peer group and pre-marital sex

	No of Responses	Percentage	X^2cal	X^2 table value	DF	P	Remark
SA	211	42.2	227.04	7.82	3	0.05	Sig
A	179	35.8					
SD	36	7.2					
D	74	14.8					
TOTAL	500	100.0					

X^2cal=227.04, X^2 table = 7.82, df=3 at 0.05

Table 2 reveals that the calculated chi square (X^2) value of 227.04 is greater than the chi-square (X^2) table vale of 7.82, with df 3 at 0.05 level of significance. In the light of this result, the hypothesis which states that peer group will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school studentsis hereby rejected. This implies that peer group was perceived as influencing pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria.

4.1. Discussion of findings

The findings of this study have revealed the influence of some factors (mass media and peer group) on pre-marital sex among adolescents in secondary school in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria. This shows that adolescents are susceptible or vulnerable to the influence of mass media and peer group in the neighbourhood on the issue of pre-marital sex.

The first hypothesis which states that mass media will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students was rejected. The implication of this finding is that mass media was perceived as influencing pre-marital sex among adolescents in secondary school in Ojo Local Government of Lagos State, Nigeria. This finding lends support to earlier studies which found that television, more than any other media, encourages cigarette smoking, sexual promiscuity and plays an important role in shaping adolescent girls' attitudes and views about society and social interaction (Murnen and Smolak, 2000; Borezekowski et al, 2000). It is through television that adolescent girls are given a connection to the expansive social world. Girls watch television to define normal and appropriate roles and behaviour for men and women. The influence of the media on adolescents is so massive that sexual content in the media particularly on television has been spreading at an alarming rate such that engaging in sexual promiscuity is seen as part of a normal life (Kunkel et al., 1999).

The study also revealed the influence of peer group on pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria as the hypotheses which states that peer group will not significantly influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students was rejected. This finding affirms DeCew's (1996) that teens are more likely to be influenced by their immediate circle of friends than by the most popular crowd at school. The finding of this study also finds support in Elliot and Menard's (1996) which stated that deviant peer affiliation is a stronger predictor of delinquent behaviour than other factors such as family, school and community characteristics.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study investigated whether some perceived factors (mass media and peer group) have influence on pre-marital sex among secondary school students in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Southwest Nigeria. The findings revealed that the perceived factors (mass media and peer group) were found to influence pre-marital sex among secondary school students in the area covered by the study as the two hypotheses stated in the study were rejected.

In the light of the foregoing, it is recommended that parents should monitor the kind of people that their children or wards associate with by showing interest in and asking questions about the friendship they (the children) keep.

The media (television in particular) should desist from promoting unhealthy and unwholesome sexual behaviour or scenario on the screen or in print. Parents should censor the content of programmes that their children or wards watch on television by advising them to develop interest in media that promote decent sexual behaviours.

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